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**SUMMER
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FREELANCE SURVEY REVEALS TWO DISTINCT GROUPS OF WRITERS

by Beryl Lieff Benderly and Dan Ferber

"Yes, NASW, a science writer can make a living as a freelance."

That long-awaited answer to a perennial question on the freelance listserv emerged from NASW's first-ever survey of its freelance members. The responses also made clear, however, that only a minority of NASW freelances support themselves through self-employment.

The survey identified two distinct categories of self-employed science writers: full-timers earning all or nearly all their writing income as independent entrepreneurs and part-timers mostly devoting fewer than half their working hours to self-employment. The largest group of freelance respondents, 47 percent, are self-employed full time. (Percentages in this article are rounded to the nearest whole number). The next largest group, 38 percent, spend under a quarter of their time on freelance assignments.

Asked for their average freelance earnings over the last five years, respondents reported sums ranging from less than \$5,000 to more than \$50,000. A reticent 10 percent, however, declined to answer this question. The figures revealed that those identifying themselves as full-time freelances have a much bigger economic stake in self-employment than do part-timers. Ninety-five percent of the full-timers earned their entire income from freelance work. In contrast, 74 percent of part-timers get less than 25 percent of their income from freelance assignments. Among those who freelance full time, 20 percent made more than \$50,000, 43 percent made between \$25,000 and \$50,000; and 11 percent made between \$15,000 and \$25,000. Seventy-one percent of part-timers, on the other hand, had freelance incomes under \$15,000 per year, although 7 percent made more than \$50,000 from freelance work.

Two hundred twenty-seven individuals, or 69 percent of the full survey's total of 327 respondents, indicated that they freelance either full or part time. This number represents 27 percent of the approximately 850 NASWers whose membership applications identify them as freelances. In contrast, only 14 percent of NASW's total membership of nearly 2,400 and 7 percent of its non-freelancing members completed the survey. Freelance Committee chair Beryl Benderly compiled the questions with the help of NASWers on and off the committee. Committee member Dan Ferber analyzed the results.

Eighty-one percent of NASW freelances write for magazines and 59 percent for Web sites. Thirty-nine percent write for trade publications (which may well overlap with other categories such as magazines or Web sites) and 37 percent for newspapers. Significant numbers of NASW freelances do PR work: 17 percent for universities, 11 percent for other research institutions, 10 percent for medical centers, and 9 percent for biotech companies. Technical writing is another market for NASWers, with 9 percent doing it for biotech clients and 7 percent for computer companies. Smaller numbers engage work on grant writing, encyclopedias, journal and academic writing, and writing for other types of corporations. Full-timers and part-timers seem to have similar distributions of work among magazines, newspapers, Web, and other venues.

Beryl Lieff Benderly is a freelance health and behavior writer in Washington, DC. Dan Ferber is a freelance writer based in Urbana, IL.

Forty-six percent of the freelance respondents have written books and many of these NASWers are multi-talented authors at home in multiple genres. Thirty-five percent of the authors have penned a single volume, 21 percent have done two, 17 percent have done five to seven, and 7 percent have done more than 10. One super-achiever has authored more than 30 different titles. Just under three-quarters of the book writers have published as sole authors, 54 percent as credited co-authors, and 10 percent as uncredited ghosts. Just under two-thirds of the authors have composed tomes in the adult trade category and 22 percent have done books for children. Fourteen percent have done textbooks, 11 percent have done technical books, and 17 percent have done other kinds of books, including reference works, manuals, guides, and novels, especially science fiction.

Sixty-two percent of the freelancers who responded offer editorial services in addition to writing. Ninety percent of these do editing, which includes substantive editing for scientists (28 percent), for books (22 percent), and for serials (15 percent) as well as copy-editing for scientists (21 percent), for books (13 percent), and for serials (12 percent). Nine percent do indexing, 5 percent do graphic design, and one or two members each offer a variety of other services including html, Webmastering, scriptwriting, photography, research, translation, creative direction, and proofreading.

Thirty-one percent of freelance respondents have a major client. A third of those with this arrangement earn between a quarter and a half of their income from that source. For 24 percent, this client accounts for a quarter of income or less. On the other hand, 18 percent of the writers with this arrangement earn up to three quarters of their income from the major client and another 18 percent between three-quarters and 99 percent of their freelance income. For 6 percent, the major client provides their entire freelance income. In addition, 37 percent of those who freelance have part-time jobs or consultancies. For 62 percent of these writers, however, that job or consultancy accounts for less than 25 percent of their time.

Though clearly not a high-paying profession, freelance writing nonetheless appears to be a satisfying one for many NASWers. Fifty-nine percent of full-timers and 53 percent of part-timers have been at it for more than five years. Another 22 percent of the total freelance respondents have racked up between two and five years as freelancers. Fourteen percent were in their second year freelancing, and 9 percent in their first.

Thirty-five percent of freelance respondents thought that NASW effectively serves freelance interests, and an additional 59 percent thought it did so sometimes, with only 7 percent saying that the organization does not serve their interests. Part-time freelancers seemed somewhat more satisfied with the organization; 38 percent of them, as opposed to 29 percent of the full-timers, gave an unequivocal "Yes." □

Do you freelance, either full-time or part-time?

227 (69.4%)	Yes
91 (27.8%)	No
9 (2.8%)	(left blank)

What percentage of your working time is spent freelancing?

106 (46.7%)	100%
4 (1.8%)	76 to 99%
3 (1.3%)	51 to 75%
22 (9.7%)	26 to 50%
89 (39.2%)	1 to 25%

What percentage of your writing income derives from freelance work?

112 (50.9%)	100%
7 (3.2%)	76 to 99%
2 (0.9%)	51 to 75%
13 (5.9%)	26 to 50%
86 (39.1%)	1 to 25%

News or feature writing

185 (81.5%)	Magazines
83 (36.6%)	Newspapers
133 (58.6%)	Web sites
12 (5.3%)	Radio
4 (1.8%)	TV
88 (38.8%)	Trade publications

Public relations writing

17 (7.5%)	Corporations
38 (16.7%)	Universities
22 (9.7%)	Medical centers
25 (11.0%)	Other research institutions
4 (1.8%)	Other non-profit organizations

Technical writing

16 (7.0%)	Computer companies
20 (8.8%)	Biotech companies
8 (3.5%)	Grant writing

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'PHYSICS TODAY' FIRING OF JEFF SCHMIDT DRAWS PROTESTS

by Christopher Shea

How seriously should one take the chest-thumping rhetorical flourishes of a manifesto? Abbie Hoffman may have urged his readers to "steal this book," but surely he might have conceded that yeah, okay, he was counting on royalties. Similarly, when Jeff Schmidt pays homage to Hoffman by kicking off his recent book with the sentences "This book is stolen. Written in part on stolen time, that is," he doesn't mean it literally.

Or does he? His bosses thought so. The question now lies at the heart of a dispute between Schmidt and his former employers at *Physics Today*, a 121,000-circulation magazine published by the American Institute of Physics, in College Park, MD.

In *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System That Shapes Their Lives* (Rowman & Littlefield), Schmidt assails the conformity that professional life demands and offers some self-help-ish tips to those sweating in their white collars. After the attention-grabbing opening line, he goes on to explain what he means by "stolen time": "Like millions of others who work for a living...my job simply didn't leave me enough energy for a major project of my own.... So, I began spending some office time on my own work, dumped my TV to reappropriate some of my spare time at home, and wrote this book." Soon after his bosses read that, Schmidt says, they marched him to the human resources office, had someone retrieve his personal effects, and told him that they never wanted to see him again. It was clear, they said, that he wasn't "fully engaged" in his work.

Can you fire an employee for what he claims to have done, without checking to see if he's bluffing?

Since that unhappy day, physicists and journalists have rallied around Schmidt to try to help him get his job back. He insists he's been canned for workplace activism and the "attitude crime" of writing a subversive book. Although he adopts a rebellious stance in his book—and describes himself as a political radical—he is a good worker, he insists. He has also taken a

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Jeff Schmidt and daughter, Joshua Rose Schmidt

PHOTO BY CHARLES STECK

few baby steps away from the bold claims in his introduction. "They have a one-hour unpaid lunch period and a total of a half hour of paid break time," Schmidt explains. "When I was working on the book during paid break time, it felt as though I was working on stolen time." The publisher of *Physics Today*, Randolph Nanna, and the human resources director of the American Institute of Physics declined to comment on the case. But if the "stolen time" claim was the sole reason for letting Schmidt go, the incident raises an interesting question: Can you fire an employee for what he claims to have done, without checking to see if he's bluffing?

Disciplined Minds has more to do with academia than you'd guess from its subtitle. Inveighing against the injustices visited upon salaried professionals, Schmidt takes his own profession, physics, as his main case study. He recalls that, in 1980, the head of his graduate adviser's research group at the University of California at Irvine wanted Schmidt's dissertation typed up on a rush order, just to get rid of him—Schmidt had apparently stirred up too much trouble with his criticisms of nuclear-weapons programs and his advocacy on behalf of another student who had flunked out. The high rate of attrition in physics especially caught his attention. "What I noticed was that the dropout rate was not politically neutral," he says. "To put it bluntly, the program favored ass kissers." As does all professional training, he might add. And expo-

sure to such pressures leads to political conformity: He claims that in 1972, the most educated Americans were the most likely to oppose withdrawal from Vietnam.

Yet do not despair, says this veteran of the 1960s (Schmidt is 54), whose book is adorned with glowing blurbs from Howard Zinn, Stanley Aronowitz, and Michael Berube: One can carve out space for free-thinking. He urges readers to lose their hunger for compliments from superiors and to "pursue your own goals while supposedly pursuing your employer's goal." Other proposals are more out there: He reprints an army manual for surviving as a prisoner of war, with the suggestion that readers mentally "substitute 'graduate or professional school' for 'POW camp.'"

Maryland's Department of Labor...[granted] him unemployment benefits.

Schmidt apparently put some of these suggestions into practice. At *Physics Today*, he argued vociferously for such reforms as the elimination of salary inequities among editors and the hiring of members of minority groups. In 1997, after he refused to pipe down at a company retreat, he was warned, in writing, that his "destructive and counterproductive" behavior would no longer be tolerated. In the last couple of years, his performance evaluations were downgraded from superior to satisfactory, he says, yet he insists he stayed ahead of schedule on his work. "He was their best articles editor before they fired him," says Jean Kumagai, who left *Physics Today* last year for *IEEE Spectrum*, an engineering magazine in New York.

So far, the American Institute of Physics has not been moved by Schmidt's pleas, nor by supportive letters from his friends and colleagues. Maryland's Department of Labor, however, sided with him in one important matter, granting him unemployment benefits [which have since run out]. The agency concluded that the AIP had presented insufficient information to show that his actions constituted misconduct. According to Michael Gottesman, a specialist in labor law at the Georgetown University Law Center, however, that victory won't give Schmidt much leverage in court should he decide to sue for wrongful dismissal. States are required to prove a former employee guilty of egregious misconduct before they can deny unemployment benefits. But as an at-will employee, lacking a contract, Schmidt can be fired for any reason not barred by an employment discrimination statute—even, theoretically, for writing a dull book, not just a controversial one.

But if Schmidt did snatch a few minutes here and there to work on his book, he notes that there are compelling precedents in physics for such petty larceny. Where would physics be if Albert Einstein hadn't stolen a few moments from the Swiss Patent Office, where he was employed when he worked out the implications of relativity? □

The firing of Jeff Schmidt, who had been an articles editor at *Physics Today* for over 19 years, has prompted a flurry of letters of protest by physicists, science writers, scholars, and educators. MIT linguist and social critic Noam Chomsky helped solicit more than 140 signatures on one letter alone. Another letter, signed by 16 former *Physics Today* staff members, urges AIP Executive Director Marc Brodsky to reverse his decision. Also lending support to Schmidt is the National Writers Union and the University of Maryland, College Park, chapter of the American Association of University Professors.

Citing their concern about the precedent that Schmidt's May 31, 2000 dismissal would set for employees everywhere, lawyers at one of Washington's largest law firms (Dickstein Shapiro Morin & Oshinsky), have waived their fees and are doing what they can to challenge *Physics Today's* actions "for the public good." *Physics Today* has retained what Schmidt calls "the most notorious union-busting law firm in the country" (Jackson, Lewis, Schnitzler & Krupman) to deal with any legal challenges in the case. Schmidt's lawyers have given the National Labor Relations Board affidavits from former *Physics Today* science writers who openly did personal writing in their offices but were not punished. But so far the NLRB has failed to see the disparate treatment as illegal. Schmidt is not surprised. He notes that the law generally favors employers, and so he believes that his best chance for justice is support from fellow science writers, physicists, and others.

The protest letters, along with reviews of the book, are posted at <http://disciplined-minds.com>. Members can contact Schmidt at 202-537-3645 or jeffschmidt@alumni.uci.edu.

SURVEY FINDS FEW RESEARCHERS DISCLOSE CONFLICTS

by Constance Holden

Despite heightened sensitivity to the subject, a new report finds that few journals publish information about their authors' ties to commerce. Explicit guidelines are rare, the survey found, and many authors may feel the rules don't apply to their situation.

The survey, reported in the April issue of *Science and Engineering Ethics*, found that a mere 327 (0.5 percent) of the 61,134 papers appearing in 181 peer-reviewed journals in 1997 contained statements about authors'

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